

The Circuit Writer



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HOW CAN 125 YEARS OF METHODIST HISTORY COME ALIVE FOR EACH OF US?

by

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Whom do I mean by US? I mean Northern New Jersey Conference with its 350 odd Ministerial Members active, retired, probationary and missionary; its 440 also odd Lay and Lay Reserve Members; its 240 Lay Leaders and its 185 Local Church Historians. Beyond these I mean the 65,800 persons who are members of 252 Local United Methodist Churches. If some would-be wag pipes up, "Sounds like someone from the Methodist Statistical Church is ringing the doorbell", let him pipe.

What do I mean by "come alive"? Here's a small boy's testimony. It was 80 years ago that I first encountered in a one-room rural school a book called "History, an Elementary History of the United States". Author, Susan B. Lee, daughter of General Robert E. Lee. To me its contents consisted of hard-to-remember dates, boring accounts of candidates and campaigns, scandals and slogans, a war whose battles were far away, and poor pictures of bearded generals and politicians. I was not interested. Then one day an older man gave me a Minie ball that his plow had uncovered in a field that I could see clearly from our front porch. "How did the Minie ball get there?" His reply was, "Some Civil War soldier dropped it there when his company camped in the field all winter." "Why in that field?" I kept looking at the field as the old man explained: "That field slopes just enough for water to run off when it rains instead of standing in puddles around tents. Notice at the end of the field there are woods with oak and hickory trees that would be handy to cut down for campfires. Shockley's spring is just beyond the woods. Out of all the fields that you can see from here this one is perfect for a winter camp." I had looked at that field every day of my life but had never seen any of these things until the old man pointed them out to me. He went on to tell me about a day in a soldier's life. A bugle call that brought men from their chilly tents, roll call, assignment to sentry duty, scouting expeditions, and occasionally the report of a comrade who was struck by a Minie ball from the rifle of a concealed sharpshooter and was buried where he fell. I then remembered an upright field stone that marked such a grave a mile and a half away.

Then the dry bones of a small green-backed Elementary History began to come alive for me. Even the stolid soldiers and bearded generals were as real as the poor fellow who was killed by a sharpshooter's Minie ball near Indian Ridge.

Childish obtuseness does not correct itself - nor does the grown-up variety either. The Ethiopian eunuch needed Philip and both needed the prophet Isaiah to point them to Jesus - who is the Great Awakener and Illuminator. A Methodist Conference Anniversary History rightly, that is, imaginatively read can come alive for any of us.

Take only four names: Henry Anson Buttz, Henry Boehm, Francis Asbury and John Wesley. Where can these four over-lapping lives lead, for example, me? If I go out the back door of my house in Florham Park and cut across neighbors' back yards for 900 feet I will come to the Hancock Cemetery where Dr. Henry A. Buttz lies buried. What was he like? "Drew's St. John," according to his students. He was also a longtime friend of Henry Boehm, Methodism's Centenarian, born in 1775, bi-lingual circuit rider, traveling companion of Bishop Asbury from 1808 to 1813 who saved the bishop from many "dumb Sundays" when the pair were in German-speaking territory in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Tennessee and other states. Buttz dined with Boehm on his 100th birthday and spoke at the funeral service a few months later when his long-time friend was laid to rest at Woodrow Church on Staten Island. Said Boehm of Bishop Asbury, "He prayed more than any man I ever knew." Said Asbury of himself, "I suppose God will let us read forever if we will not pray." A most revealing cautionary remark! "The Prophet of the Long Road" says one author was "Ubiquitous," certainly as much so as was humanly possible for one who year after year rode a circuit reaching from the Canadian border to Milledgeville, Georgia. H. L. Mencken who enjoyed emptying his Schimpflexikon on Methodists admitted his inability to understand what inward impulsion drove Asbury onward so selflessly to the very end. Asbury's life over-lapped, or better stated, was inextricably interlinked with that of John Wesley. If any Methodist is asked to quote one line from Wesley's Journals it will likely be, "I felt my heart strangely warmed." What follows is seldom quoted "I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a most especial manner despitely used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there what I now first felt in my heart." Any forthright aggressive Christian tends to encounter opposition and to accumulate misrepresentations outwardly, epithets publicly and resentments inwardly. The 7th, 8th and 9th Beatitudes are concerned with this condition. Apparently at Aldersgate John Wesley experienced the Grace Sufficient (that is, the Love of God against the background of Eternity) to do something about this he could not do before. Is there any human being that is free from this need?

Four names, Buttz, Boehm, Asbury, Wesley, and such a scanty supply of facts as one paragraph can contain, I suggest to each and all of us as a means of helping to bring to life the 125 years of history of our Annual Conference.

A lot of folks have had a finger in this pie, this symposium, this 125th Anniversary History. It is the only way such a record can be written. Once it is written how can we get it read? Believe it or not, this is the most perplexing part of an Anniversary undertaking. To me it would seem that as a minimum EVERY LOCAL CHURCH would want the following KEY PERSONS to "read, mark and digest" their personal copy of the 125th Anniversary History, namely, the Pastor or Minister in charge, the Lay Leader, the Lay Member, the Local Church Historian, the President of the United Methodist Women, and the President of the Board of Trustees. Being by natural disposition and considerable experience a pastor, I would add a copy for SHUT-INS. That makes EIGHT COPIES IN ALL. If, a la Paul, "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump," should not a Local Church have at least EIGHT leaveners in its congregation?

The Anniversary History will be available for distribution at Annual Conference in June 1982 and order blanks will be sent out in advance.

The prices are:

1 copy-----\$3.00
4 copies-----10.00
8 copies-----16.00

Postage will be added to the cost if they are to be mailed. So come to Conference prepared to take home copies for your church!

HISTORICAL SOCIETY DUES!!

It is now time to renew your membership in the HISTORICAL SOCIETY. Dues are \$10.00 for each calendar year or \$100.00 for Life Membership. Enclosed is one envelope in which to insert your dues and a return envelope for your convenience in sending your dues to our treasurer. Support the projects of your Historical Society by joining now or renewing your membership for 1982, our 125th ANNIVERSARY YEAR.

CELEBRATING THE HERITAGE:

MOUNT HOREB: A three-week Thursday evening seminar on the Wesleyan Heritage was held during the month of January. Dr. Rowe of Drew University was resource leader.

PLAINFIELD: The First United Methodist Church of Plainfield began a year long celebration of its 150th anniversary with a special service of worship and exhibit on Sunday, February 14, 1982. Dr. Rowe of Drew University was guest preacher.

OTHERS? Please let our editor (Dr. Rowe) know about what celebrations have taken place or are planned in your parish.

ANNUAL DINNER MEETING

Tuesday, May 11, 1982

The annual dinner meeting of the Historical Society of the Northern New Jersey Annual Conference will be held in the Livingston United Methodist Church on Tuesday evening, May 11, 1982. Details on program, exact time and information concerning reservations will be mailed soon. Mark the date on your calendar now and plan to join us! Speaker: Professor Russell Richey, Drew University.

LOCAL CHURCH HISTORY CONTEST - Awards to be presented during 1982 session of Annual Conference

Three churches - Libertyville, Newton and Pond Eddy - have submitted local church histories published during the calendar year 1981 for our ninth annual **LOCAL HISTORY RECOGNITION CONTEST**. Two awards will be presented during the 1982 session of Conference in June.

If your church plans to publish a history of the local church in 1982, we urge you to enter it in next year's contest. Large or small, pamphlet or cloth

bound, mimeographed or printed, all histories printed during 1982 are eligible. Each history will become part of the Conference's permanent collection. MAIL ONE COPY TO: Dr. Kenneth E. Rowe, Drew University Library, Madison, NJ 07940 by February 1, 1983.

RETIRED AND RETIRING PASTORS

Have you made your tape of reminiscences and your Very Best sermon for the Conference Archives? If not, please get in touch with Paul Spiecker, Clifton, for details. Telephone: 684-4816.

WE'RE PLANNING A BIRTHDAY PARTY!!

Sunday afternoons in March have been set aside for district meetings to begin planning for an event in each district in the fall of 1982 to celebrate our Conference's 125th birthday: March 7, Wyckoff; March 14, Nutley; March 21, Rahway; March 28, Hackettstown. Program in each church will be from 4:00 to 5:30 P.M. Plan to attend! Bring your ideas and suggestions! See a movie about the new Methodist Historical Center at Drew!

REMEMBER!! HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP DUES!!!

Anyone may be a member of the Historical Society. You may join by paying the dues. It is now time to renew your membership in the HISTORICAL SOCIETY if you are already a member or you may become a new member now by paying your dues for 1982. Dues are \$10 for each calendar year or Life Membership is \$100. We enclose an envelope for your dues and a return envelope for your convenience in sending your dues to our treasurer. Support the projects of your Historical Society by joining now or renewing your membership now for 1982, our 125th ANNIVERSARY YEAR.